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THE LAW OF GRACE IN THE BESTOWMENT OF "THE INCREASE," CONSIDERED IN ITS APPLICATION TO CHRISTIANS.

"I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase." 1st Cor. iii. 6.

AT the time the apostle addressed his first epistle to the Corinthians, they were divided in respect to their spiritual leaders; one saying, "I am of Paul"—another, "I am of Apollos"—and another—"I am of Cephas." With a view to correct this evil, he seeks to instruct them in regard to the functions and appropriate position of the Christian ministry. He recalls to their notice the fact, that he himself had planted this very church, that he first preached the Gospel to them, and sowed the seed of Divine truth. Providence directing him to another field, Apollos came; and entering upon the labors of his predecessor, he watered this spiritual soil. God, however, gave the increase; their ministry was successful because it was favored by God. Hence neither himself, nor Apollos, nor any other preacher should be made the centre of schism or faction: they were "laborers together with God," united in design, and all equally dependent on God for success.

By a careful inspection of the text, in itself and in its relations, it will be perceived, that all which the writer means by *planting* or *watering*, as attributed to himself, or Apollos, is associated with the idea of God, as giving the increase. The blessing comes in the presence, and not in the absence of the appropriate means. There is the planting—also the watering—also the increase given by God. This is the order of the apostle's thoughts. Between the use of means and the gift of grace, they suggest some connection. *What is this connection?* Are all methods of preaching the Gospel and applying moral causes in the kingdom of Christ equally adapted to success? Will men be as likely to be converted by flights of fancy and romantic exhilarations of taste, as by solemn and pungent exhibitions of truth? Is there any rule in heaven on this subject? Is that rule so well marked that we can define it, and by its light, with some degree of probability, calculate results, even before we see them? Since we depend on God for success, have we any means of inferring beforehand how

the Deity will be disposed to treat our efforts; or, is it a matter of pure conjecture, where the result is as likely to be one way as the other? These are grave inquiries.

The entire sum of all Christian efforts to extend the Gospel, and bring men to the saving acknowledgment of the truth, implies in the minds of Christians the existence of *some* answer to the above questions. Without such an answer these efforts would possess no rational basis. In its most *generic* view, this answer includes the following elements of thought, viz.: that in executing the redemptive designs of the Gospel, it is the plan of God that *means* shall be used; that their employment is committed to the instrumentality and agency of men; that the means themselves are of a nature to admit of judicious application or the opposite; that, as a general principle, it is a rule of divine influence to act proportionately to, and in coincidence with, the proper use of Gospel means. If we deny any, or all of these positions, we shall contradict the word of God, and not less so, the experience of the Christian world; and the moment we undertake to *do anything* in the cause of Christ, our practice and theory will be at variance. In admitting these views we should cautiously secure our minds against any scheme which is based upon the independent and self-sufficient efficiency of means. A false attitude of the intellect upon these points, especially the *last*, can never fail to be of essential disservice. We should understand with great distinctness, that we are not mere passive recipients of good; that we are to be positive and active organs in its communication; that our moral sphere is one in which we are bound to be wise, and summon to action our best powers in the very best way; that there is nothing in the structure of the Gospel system, or in its relation to the agency and sovereignty of God, that in the slightest degree interferes with the true range and proper application of second causes. It is as important that we see and realize our *dependence* upon God for success in all our efforts. Beholding both positions in their insulated and their mutually related character; beholding the great law of grace, which unites and reduces them to the symmetry of a perfect system, we shall be prepared on the one hand to appreciate our responsibilities, and on the other to trust in the power, and seek the aid of the Great Supreme. It is in this way only, that we can make practical the idea of *acting*, as if all depended on action, and *trusting*, as if all depended on God. It being granted, that God ordinarily bestows the increase in the ratio of the kind and the character of the means, it does not follow, that they should become the exclusive theatre of our confidence; but it does follow, that our responsibility in their employment is one of intense and awful nature.

This law of grace in the bestowment of the increase, considered in its application to Christians, will be the theme of the present inquiry.

You will permit me to assume that it is God's design in regard to every Christian, *that he should do good*. He can do good, and he ought to do so. God requires it. Everything in the moral universe demands it. As to the *quantity* of good, which he is to do, we can adopt

but one rule ; it ought to be as great as his circumstances and capacities will admit. If it be less, he sins by the defect.

There is another thought which is nearly allied to this, viz. : all other things being equal, the amount of a Christian's usefulness will be in the ratio of his intelligence, his piety and his action. God, who giveth the increase, usually giveth it in the observance of this ratio. It is his plan to honor the higher developments and aspects of Christian character more fully, than those stunted and dwarfish growths, which seem hardly ever to have seen the sun of righteousness, or to have been watered with the dews of heaven.

From this latter view it follows, that in order to realize an *increasing and progressive* development of Christian influence and power, as the gift of God, there must be a prior and corresponding increase of Christian elements within us. The latter are first, in the order both of nature and time. They grow and expand together, but it is always in the relation of a cause and its effect. It is of great importance that we recognize in our *practice* the truth of this principle. To philosophize upon the labors of others, is a very easy task ; to hear sermons, and then give our judgment upon their merits, is that, to which any man is equal ; to look over the evils of our race and then sigh in sentimental inactivity over human sorrows, demands nothing more than a heart, having the property of feeling ; it costs a man no more to *cry* than to have the requisite apparatus for the same ; to receive from others that, which is the product of laborious and prayerful application, requires nothing but a wakeful mind and consenting will. These and kindred exercises have but little of the grandeur and power which distinguished the great apostle, or immortalized the career of Luther. A religious character, in which these things are the chief constituents, costs nothing ; you can hardly imagine anything cheaper ; and I may add, that it is worth nothing. To take hold of this world, and acting in accordance with the laws God has defined in the scheme of redemption, to bring men to Christ, and through him to the favors of a reconciled God, is a very different thing. It is not a mere work of words—not a sudden explosion of sensibility, that expires by its own combustion ; it calls for the consecration of man's best powers, fitted and trained for service under the tutelage of the Deity. It is the very kind of labor, which it is most difficult to perform, and from which our partially sanctified hearts will be most likely to recoil. It is the arena of spiritual heroism, where achievements are not talked about, but *made* ; where plans are not dreamt of, but *executed*. The qualities which are suited to this theatre are eminently *practical* ; and, to repeat an idea already stated, they consist in a well instructed intellect, a devotedly pious heart, and the habit of great Christian activity. Where these exist, there it is Heaven's choice to bestow a blessing. There will be a coincidence between these spiritual endowments and the degree of the divine favors. It is in this way that the Deity places his gracious and providential signet upon the higher and purer developments of Christian character.

These views beget the following question, viz. :—*How shall we pro-*

cure in an enlarged degree those qualities, which God so much delights to honor? How shall we gain this high grade of personal and practical Christianity, stretching its dimensions through our whole character, the prerequisite of a social and communicated Christianity? How shall this be done? You will permit me to express my fear, that some men have never asked this question; that others have imagined they were not the *proper* persons, either to ask it, or to answer it; that still others have philosophised upon it, as it bears upon the practice of other men, and not their own. On this, as on many other subjects, we are in danger of being like the Scribes and Pharisees—sitting in Moses' seat, and uttering wise sayings for the practice of others, which we never think of appropriating to ourselves. Let us pray, that we may not do this upon the present occasion; let both speaker and hearer bring the question home to their own hearts:—How shall we under God develope ourselves, that God may develope us in the world in which we live?

Hoping that we may all be willing to entertain this question, I proceed to observe, that it has many *details*, but a very few *principles*. In the answer which I propose to give, I shall fix upon but one principle. It may be thus stated:—*We are to grow in all the qualities of an internal and personal Christianity by the repeated and habitual exercise of those qualities.* I shall seek to give you some illustrations of the truth of this position.

I. It is in correspondence with universal analogy.

Man has no mental capability, and hardly any that is physical, which may not be wonderfully improved and developed by the simple law of exercise. There is no other way, in which we can acquire the use of our powers. All our processes of education, whether they propose to direct or strengthen human faculties, are based upon this principle. It is a principle universal; affecting the infant in the cradle, the sturdy smith revolving the muscles of his arm to a giant's power; equally affecting man in all the higher ranges of his career. An oriental emperor prided himself very much upon his skill in the use of the bow and arrow. Upon a certain occasion he gave an exhibition of his skill. He then directed his attention to the queen, expecting to hear from her the language of commendation. She simply remarked to him, that "practice makes perfect." The emperor regarded the language as an insult, and banished its author into lonely solitude. By the announcement of this principle having lost the possession of royal honors, she resolved in her retirement to test the question of its truth. Her plan was, to take an animal when young, but which, being full grown, would weigh several hundred pounds, and carry it up and down a flight of stairs, six times upon every day. She entered upon her work. As her charge increased in bulk and weight she increased in strength, until finally she was able to carry it according to the proposed method, when it had amounted to the weight of several hundred pounds. The emperor, in one of his royal excursions, beheld the exiled queen in the act of exerting her

muscular power. He sought an interview. To the question, how had she gained this wonderful strength, she replied, "*Oh! sir, practice makes perfect.*" These words produced an instant recognition of her person, and restoration to honors, which she had lost by simply stating a philosophical truth. Will you please to recollect the idea, "practice makes perfect?" A man cannot drive a nail, or soar in poetic verse, without involving this principle. He that is not trained under its tuition, is like a plant that has never seen the sun—a mere mass of moral *mucilage*; there is nothing which he *can* do, and nothing which he is *fit* to do. The doctrine of cast or fashion, which allows human beings to grow up inactive, is at war with the ordination of God; it makes them anything but human beings in all the practical and effective senses of life.

II. But, lest I should expand this analogical argument too far, I proceed to remark, that the proposition of Christian development, as the result of exercise, is a truth of direct and positive experience. There is no trait, or grace of Christian character, to which the principle does not apply. That you may the more conveniently apprehend this application, allow me to descend to several particulars.

1. In the first place, I fix my eye upon a Christian, who makes it a matter of conscience to be a regular attendant upon the public worship of God, and, when in the house of God, to be an attentive and faithful hearer of the word. He is neither a spiritual vagrant nor a Sabbath stroller. He has a religious home, and when the day of God returns he is there. He feels it to be his duty and privilege, to attend as many services on the Sabbath as the people of God in their discretion shall think it best to have. Of his value to the pastor—of the excellence of his influence among the people, I do not propose to say a word. What is the effect upon *himself*? He gradually becomes attached to this order of things; this attachment increases; it finally transmutes itself into a fixed and powerful habit; and then it is as natural to him as the breath he draws. He no more thinks of remaining at home, or wandering to other places, when his own church is open, than he would think of sleeping when the calls of business summon him to action. His example is a good one; in the end he becomes a trained soldier in the service of Christ—a man, who is always on the field and ready to do his duty. These results have been the product of exercise in a specific direction. And if I were to say, that there are many professing religion, who need to look at this subject, and in the light of it, to make some alterations in their practice, I should say no more than I solemnly believe. The habits of some members of the church are exceedingly deplorable; they seldom visit the house of God more than once on the Sabbath, and very frequently, not at all. As they now live, they never can be much developed as Christians. These things ought not so to be in any circle of Christ's followers upon earth. I would not unwarrantably lay my finger upon their conscience, or sit in judgment upon their private rights, or determine the quantity of their domestic claims; yet I cannot forbear to intimate a

solemn caution on this point. Will you think of it, judge of its application to yourself, and make such use thereof, as will be best here and hereafter ?

2. For a second illustration I would have you fix your thoughts upon the exercise of *prayer*. That prayer is one of the urgent duties and rich privileges of every man, who would walk with God and go to Heaven, is a proposition which needs no proof. Who then are the men that most devoutly love the exercise of prayer, and most fully possess the power and spirit of prayer ? Your minds have reached the answer more rapidly than my words ; *they are the men who pray the most*. In their experience there is a glorious combination of action and reaction. By praying they learn to love the duty ; and loving it, they are led frequently to repeat it. They grow strong in this exercise ; accustomed to it, they learn how to approach the Eternal Throne, with an ardor, simplicity and confidence peculiarly their own ; they plead the promises as though they believed them, and procure Heaven's benedictions upon themselves and their fellow men. They are free from that vapid and arid stupor, so characteristic of the man who seldom prays. Prayers, that have floated over congealed sensibility, or have been bleached of all their power in passing the intellectual region, are not the prayers they make. When they pray, the auditor feels that there is a moral contact of the finite and the Infinite. They can maintain the spirit, and also the proprieties of prayer, without the aid of liturgical suggestions. How is it with you, my brethren, on this subject ? Is it well with you ? Have you a place and season for secret prayer ? Those of you, who are heads of families, do you pray in those families ? Are you willing to unite with other Christians in social prayer ; not simply hearing and silently praying, but yourselves openly and vocally leading at proper times ? Say not, that you have no talent to perform the duty of prayer. This sentiment would pain you and mortify your pride, should it come from the lips of others. If it were true, it would prove a truth more serious and awful than itself ; it would prove, that you have not sufficient talent to become Christians. It is not true ; all that you need is the powerfully developing influence of exercise and action. This is able to make you princes, prevalent in prayer—a blessing to yourselves and the world.

3. For a third illustration I advert to the duty of *frequent and faithful conferences* with men on the subject of religion.—That it is the duty of *somebody* to converse about religion, to convey to, and impress upon others, its solemn realities, I conclude will be granted by all. It would seem equally obvious, that those who make a profession of religion, are the most proper persons to perform this duty ; it may be fairly expected, that they should exert their powers of speech in vindicating the religion of Christ, and winning a dying world to its acceptance. Where was that philosophy begotten, which teaches a Christian to be religiously *dumb*, with such a theme, and in such a world ? Most certainly not in the Bible ; it never came down from heaven.

Nearly all the influence that is exerted on earth, is exerted by *talking*; and a nobler theatre for the use of this power, than religion, never existed. There must be something radically wrong in the soul of him who can never speak for Christ. How shall the world know that he is the Saviour's friend? The *reflected* effect of the duty upon him who performs it, is as great as the duty itself is important. I speak the truth, and nothing but the truth, in declaring, that the power to perform, grows, strengthens, and wonderfully matures, under this kind of training. Now suppose all this power, which is lodged in the church of God, were called forth and fully developed, what amazing effects would be experienced in this world! Behold all the Christians of the globe, touching society at ten thousand angles, and at each point infusing the word of life into the soul of every dying sinner; think you not, that the spirit of God would wing its way from the celestial world and harmonize in the intensity of its action with this intensity of Christian effort? Because this supposition is not real, what a vast amount of power lies buried in the church! It is buried, while eternity reflects to the regions of time the death-knell of ruined millions. The professed servants of God, in great numbers, *practically* plead their incapacity to warn and beseech the wicked; the world of wo uses no such argument against their reception, and the worm that never dies, loses not its power in the progress of their everlasting misery. Would that this thought might be so impressed upon us, that we should forget that *timidity*, which we ought never to have had, and that *inaptitude* to tell of the things of Jesus, which is our shame and reproach. Let these hints, for they are but hints, find a lodgment in every conscience; let every hearer adjust the question of duty which they involve, so that he can meet his own decision in the day of judgment.

4. For a fourth particular you will permit me to call your attention to the *diligent and proper study* of the Christian Scriptures. To be known, the Scriptures are to be studied; they are to be diligently searched by men. This is the appointed condition of their proper knowledge. The mere reading of the Bible in a loose and hasty manner brings very little benefit to any man; he forgets, as fast as he reads, and he does not understand, as he reads. To take up this book, deeply impressed with its high authority; viewing it as the record of divine thoughts, to bestow upon it a concentrated and powerful attention;—to be determined to master its doctrines, and visit home to the deepest abodes of our own consciousness its heavenly principles; this, hearer, is a very different exercise of the mind, and it will be as different in its results. It is the higher and better action of the soul upon things divine and invisible. Let us suppose a man to enter upon this work in solemn earnest; suppose him to pursue it with a diligence and effort that never tire, what will be the effect of this continued mental action upon Bible truth? He will be certain to experience a peculiar process of development in the direction of the Bible. The experiment was never tried without this result. His knowledge will be enlarged; that knowledge will become accurate and harmonious; the vigor of his own mind will be increased; the misty shades, which mental dull-

ness throws over the truth, will be dissipated, and he will see things clearly. His interest in the exercise will be in proportion to its continuance and intensity; and if he continue the process sufficiently long he will perfectly ravish his own soul with the study of the Bible. His fondness may become so exquisite and delicate, that he, at all times, seems to be in communion with the spiritual world; his religious sensibilities blaze out upon you, as if they had been lighted in heaven. How such a man is fitted for the work, either of planting or watering in the spiritual vineyard of Christ! How rare are his attainments, and how much guilt rests upon the church of God, that they are so rare! To be consistent we ought to do one of three things, viz.: to condemn this train of thought, or reduce it to practice, or condemn ourselves for the neglect. It is not too much to say, that in this age of bannered and bustling benevolence, of strange, mixed, and conflicting moral tendencies, there is great need of keeping close to the Bible. We do not want less action, but more meditation, more of soul-stirring contact with truth divine, to keep piety alive upon the altars of the heart. In the absence of this ingredient, the piety of the church will become noisy, clamorous, and powerless in one direction; formal, mechanical, and purely artificial in another; it will have all the symbols and insignia of power, without the elements of victory and strength. The history of all ages proves, that whatever comes between our intelligence and the Bible, so as to separate the two, results in our weakness; and if long continued, it will issue in total ruin. It may assume a most captivating title; it may burrow through antiquity, searching for jewels in the *patristic* age; it may adorn religion with *scenic* parade; or invest it with the lofty and scornful mien of philosophy, human and born below the Throne; if it intercept communion between the soul and the word of God, it will have the essential, the damning, the destructive properties of a Roman Pope. This is no flourish of words. Truth lies here—such truth as it has cost the world groans and ages of darkness to learn.

5. Finally, I would submit for your consideration *the habit of uniform Christian activity*. Some Christians are distinguished from others by the title of *active Christians*. What is Christian activity? It may be defined either by its *end* or its *means*. For its *end* it has the deliberate design of making men Christians, and thus glorifying God; its chief, its *only* purpose is to proselyte the world to Christ. In reference to the question of *means*, it employs all the methods of Heaven's appointment for the production of this end. It does not propose any emendations upon the plan of God; but such as it is, to use it with all its might. It is a spirit which acts everywhere and anywhere, where good can be done, and souls can be saved. It never says to others,—“Go forward, we wish you great success—we very much approve your course.” Its language is, “Come, let *us* rise up and build.” It never spends its strength as a mere spectator, and above all, as a mere ascetic and antinomian critic upon labors, which he is too *lazy* to undertake; it has time neither for the one nor the other; it has infinitely better business to do. What are the operations of this spirit upon him,

whose it is, written by the finger of time upon the tablet of ages? The mind is increasingly qualified for service by the simple act of service. By the experience of toil it learns to endure hardness as a good soldier of Christ. It is not easily fatigued, trifles do not discourage it; like some birds of passage it can remain long on the wing. When responsibilities are to be met, and great labors are to be performed, you will find this mind ready and willing to share its full weight of moral burdens. It is not the mind to be in an eternal flutter, yet doing nothing; feverish, yet exhausting itself in a mere effort to expurgate its own excitement. It has acquired a steadiness of purpose, a soberness and earnestness, which are the fruits of beginning to do, and then long-continuance in doing. Such a Christian, I assure you, is no figure of speech; there are in him all the dignity and reality of a man qualified to do something. The church needs such men; first, to keep it steady; secondly, to block it up when it makes advancement; thirdly, by continued pressure to augment its aggressive action upon the powers of darkness.

This discussion opens a very broad theatre for inferential remarks. Pleasing and profitable as the exercise might be, my time forbids me to indulge in it. With a brief retrospective glance I shall relieve your patience. What are you, my Christian hearers? *Planters and waterers* in the vineyard of God, which is the world. What is the ground of your encouragement? The assurance that God will bestow "the increase" upon your efforts. What is the ordinary relation of the divine benediction to the kind and character of those efforts? One that honors God, and speaks the words of deep and awful responsibility to the conscience of every Christian. What is the mode by which we, acting harmoniously with the laws and kingdom of grace, shall do the most good and the least evil? How simple the answer! We must be Christians ourselves; and in the only way in which it can be done, the elements, which make us Christians, must be largely expanded. We shall never rise above our own level; and if this be at a low point, though we had an angel's gifts, the world will be none the better. Cancel not your responsibility by some metaphysical subtlety about the sovereignty of God; plead not the inefficiency of means as an apology for selfishness and idleness; the kingdom of grace so harmonizes with that of means, as to preserve the integrity of the whole, and leave unimpaired the distinct sphere of each. Look around you—look at the thousands who are impenitent in these great cities; behold the work sin is achieving; follow out its results through unmeasured ages; then tell me, ye that are born of God, and who hope to shine in heaven, shall nothing be done? How well are you prepared to enter upon the work of rescue, and in all its details scatter the radiance of the skies through the walks of men? Events move too rapidly, and great issues are too speedily made up for cold speculation. There is the *practical*, as well as the *theoretical*, in moral being. I have sought in this discourse to give you the former, and I now commend it to you, and the God of grace, for his blessing.